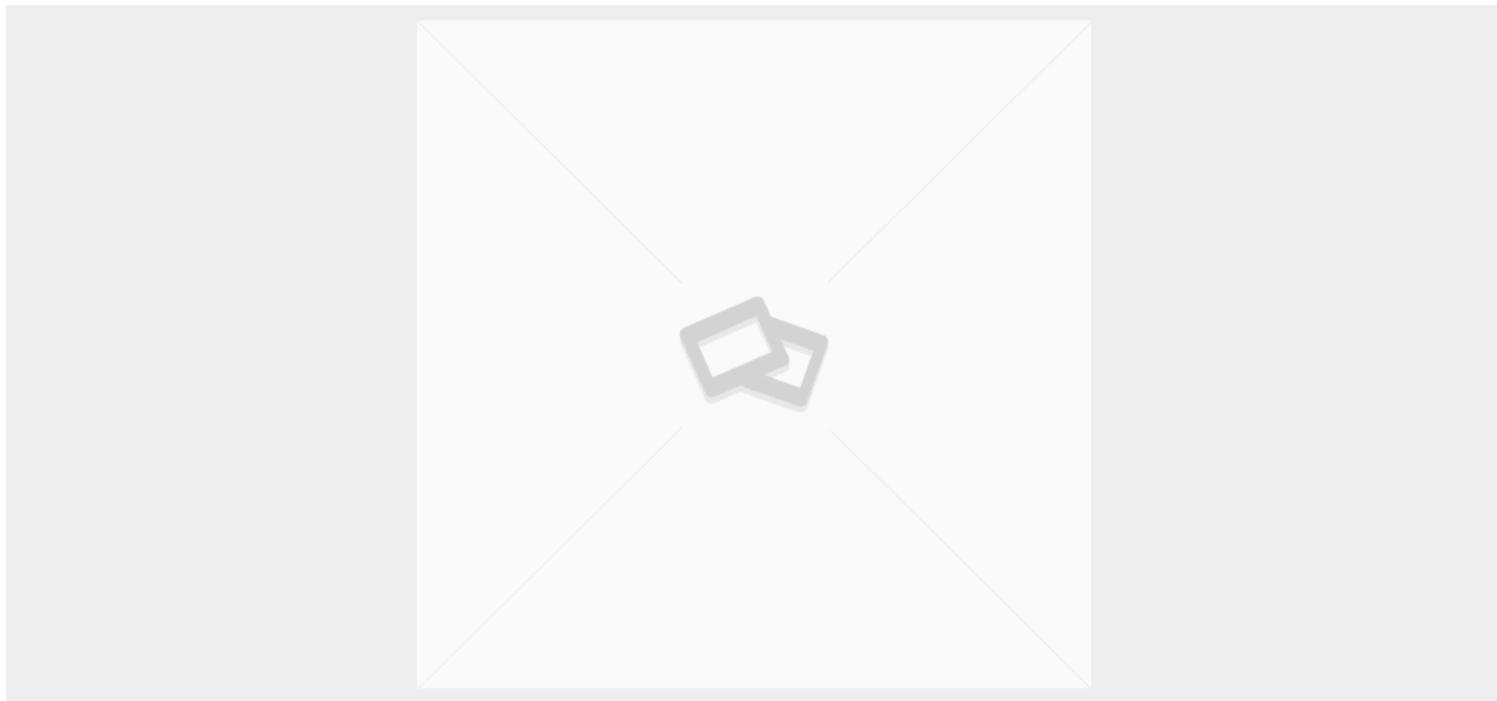


WHY I CANNOT BE A CONSERVATIVE PART I-III

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PART I

THE HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE

By Viken L. Attarian, 10 October 2008

Quick, take on this challenge!

Name the greatest writer of the past two centuries who has been of a declared right-wing or conservative ideology. If you can, then name five great ones.

Do the same for the greatest intellectuals or philosophers of the past two centuries.

Now try the same for composers, painters, sculptors, architects.

How about great social reformers?

Similarly, how about the great scientists, or the great filmmakers and actors?

How many names have you got in total one, two, five or ten? You would be really hard pressed to find more than a handful in each category, even when you spend a lot of time researching and *Google*-ing.

Let me help you out, but before I do, here are some caveats.

a) *The list is based on **truly** great contributions to the human cultural and intellectual heritage.*

b) *Pop stars and most figures of popular culture are **not** included. Unless they have left a real lasting legacy (which is usually more the exception than the rule).*

c) *Economists, financiers and business leaders are **not** included. It is doubtful that their legacy is of a really lasting nature. After all, no one can name the richest man during the Golden Age of Greek philosophy, or the top businessman of the Renaissance.*

d) *Political leaders and monarchs are **excluded**, because a political conviction and position is part of their *raison-d'être*. We are only interested in these individuals in as much as their political position is a secondary variable, not a primary one.*

e) *It is important to look at the past two centuries, because the political conceptualization of the right vs. left is shaped throughout that period. One would be very hard-pressed to define the ideology of Socrates or Shakespeare within those relatively modern constructs. Also, the political or ideological positions must be attributable either through the actions of the named individuals or their public statements.*

f) *Any racially motivated declaration or public espousing of discrimination is deemed to be automatically those of a right-winger. Also, criticizing Israel does not make one an anti-Semite and hence a right-winger, whereas openly expressing disdain and hatred for Jews does. The former is a democratic right, the latter is hate propaganda.*

So, here is the list:

Great writers:

Unequivocal right-wingers:

Winston Churchill - (Nobel winner for literature - 1953). He of course needs no introduction, but it is a little known fact that he was however a member of the Liberal Party of Britain from 1904 to 1924.

Ezra Pound - An American genius of an innovator in modern English poetry and literary criticism. He lived in Italy, was a notorious supporter of Mussolini's fascists and a self-declared anti-Semite in his radio broadcasts supporting the Axis powers during WWII.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn - (Russian author, Nobel winner for literature - 1970). Suffered tremendously in Soviet prison camps. A Russian ultra-nationalist who had very public anti-Semitic positions and publicly called for the continued bombing and the destruction of Vietnam to "save" them from Communism.

Knut Hamsun - (Norwegian author and Nobel winner for literature - 1920). Notorious supporter of Norwegian Nazi collaborators as well as an outright Hitler admirer, who even wrote a glorifying obituary of Hitler when he learnt of the latter's death.

Yukio Mishima - Arguably, one of the greatest Japanese writers and intellectuals of the post WWII era. He was also a filmmaker and militarist who organized his own right-wing militia that attempted a military coup in 1970. When it failed, Mishima committed suicide through ritual *seppuku* (*hara-kiri*).

André Malraux - (French author, and Minister of Culture 1959-1969). Fought Franco's right-wing Falangist militia during the Spanish Civil War, he was a member of the French leftist coalition of the Front Populaire, as well as of the French Resistance. After WWII, he became a supporter of De Gaulle and a very influential intellectual and minister in France.

Potential right-wingers:

T.S. Eliot - (Nobel winner for literature - 1948). Accused of anti-Semitism. He might have been innocent of it ideologically, but he certainly has expressed some slight (veiled) anti-Semitism in his literary works.

C.S. Lewis - (author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*). A born again Christian at the age of 33, his political views cannot be classified as right-wing, but his views about Christian morality and faith would probably place him closer to the right side of the political spectrum. It would of course be a stretch, since he has clearly declared himself for a strong democratic tradition, separation of church and state and a despiser of theocracies.

Jorge Luis Borges - One of the greatest of all Latin American writers (and my personal favorite on this list) with an incredible imagination and an extremely creative sense of the aesthetics of language. Borges was a staunch anti-Peronist (Peron had a particular disdain for Borges and demoted him to a meat inspector's job); although that alone would not make him a right-wing thinker, he was sympathetic towards the military dictators that governed Argentina in the 1970s, perhaps because they were anti-Peronists themselves.

Great intellectuals/philosophers: None !!!!!

Great Social Reformers: Doubly None !!!!!

Great Scientists:

1. **Edward Teller** - *The principal scientist whose team invented the thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb. He was a member of Oppenheimer's Manhattan Project (atomic bomb) team who later denounced Oppenheimer as unpatriotic and untrustworthy. He was opposed to the US-Soviet nuclear disarmament initiatives and treaties, and assisted in the setting up of the clandestine Israeli nuclear weapon program.*

2. **William Shockley** - *(Nobel prize in physics - 1956). The co-inventor of the transistor, originally of Bell Labs. He was a paranoid inventor who espoused racist views and was a proponent of eugenics and government control of populations via sterilization and the enhancement of intelligence with selective breeding.*

Great Painters and sculptors:

1. **Salvador Dali** – As an artist, Dali needs no introduction. While in the early part of the 20th century he did move in left-wing intellectual circles and had close collaboration with many artists of the same group, he eventually became a supporter of and an apologist for Franco's dictatorial right-wing Spanish regime.

Great Architects:

Potential right-wingers :

1. **Antoni Gaudi** – One of my all time favorite architects. He was a very devout Catholic and that would be enough to swing him over to a right-ideology classification. However, as a Spanish Catalan, he was also very nationalist and stood up to the Spanish dictatorial authorities in defense of Catalonian national interests such as the defense of Catalonian culture and language.

Great Composers:

1. **Richard Wagner** – A prolific, talented and innovative composer, Wagner was also a self-declared anti-Semite who wrote against what he called "Jewishness in Music" and attacked Jewish composers. He also wrote about the purity and superiority of the German race. It is no coincidence that his work was appropriated by the Nazis.

Great Filmmakers:

Potential right-wingers :

1. **Elia Kazan** – Winner of three Academy Awards, Kazan was a member of several left-wing and progressive movements in his youth, including the Communist party. During the McCarthy "Hollywood witch hunts" of the early 50s, Kazan denounced several of his former left-wing colleagues. He is listed here only because of that act. He however, never considered himself a conservative, but quite the opposite. Orson Welles, while condemning his act of denouncing said that he remained one of the greatest film directors.

Great Rock Stars:

1. **Elvis Presley** – He asked for an audience with President Richard Nixon and offered to help rid the US of hippies and the Black Panthers. He wanted to have an FBI mandate to clear the minds of youth from the "Communist and anti American propaganda of the Beatles".
2. **Eric Clapton** – Supported Enoch Powell's British ultra right-wing party (the Ulster Unionists) of Northern Ireland and, in a drunken stupor screamed that he wanted a "white and clean Britain".

Great Actors:

1. **Charlton Heston** – This Academy Award winner also needs no introduction. My personal favorite roles he portrayed are those of Col. George Taylor in the original Planet of the Apes (1968), and Michelangelo in The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965). It is a lesser known fact that prior to becoming a gun-shaking right-wing advocate of R. Reagan, George Bush Sr. and George W. Bush, Heston was actually once approached by the

Democratic Party to run for office. In his younger days he opposed the Vietnam War, supported civil rights and even gun control. After the late seventies, he opposed affirmative action, became the president of the NRA and was caught on camera by Michael Moore with a blatant racist discourse.

That's it. That's the list. All glorious 3 pages of it, including my relatively detailed descriptions.

I suspect, that if you apply the criteria I am outlining, it would be really difficult to add any substantial number to this list and expand it significantly; you can see that even though I am a politically biased anti-conservative, I have decided to give the benefit of the doubt to some on the list and have "generously" classified them here.

The real question is why is this list so small? Why are so few advancements of the human intellectual achievement attributable to right-wingers and conservatives? The opposing list would literally be contained in a volume per category. They are not comparable neither in quantity and one could successfully argue that nor even in comparative quality.

I believe that the reason is intrinsic to conservatism. By definition, conservatives would like to preserve the status quo, or to reach an ideologically romantic state of the "good old days". An illusory state which existed in the early Victorian period but for only wealthy upper class white male industrialists and financiers.

That state of existence however was far removed from the reality of most people of the planet at the time. Here is what that dream-like state includes:

- *A yearning for empires and "great military achievements and conquests". It was the time of empires and colonization (the fact that cannons were used against spears and that it was hardly an equal contest seems to elude the advocates). The British, French, Russian and to a lesser extent German. The American one was forming. Empire building was of course at the expense of the people that are conquered.*
- *It was also the time of uncontrolled, unregulated and unfettered industrial and capitalist expansion (very similar to our own times right now)*
- *The only modern "democracies" were the French and American republics. The French one rapidly degenerated into a reign of terror and then to Napoleon's personality cult, the American one was founded upon the toil of slaves.*
- *Women have no rights. No legal abortion, no votes, no equal rights in the workplace. The workplace of course being that of servants or brothels and slightly later that of the grueling factories.*
- *Workers have no rights. Neither do children. Most of the latter worked in mines and factories.*
- *Most social mores are governed by a strict, puritan and strongly religious code of conduct. The religious hierarchy has unbelievable influence on the daily lives of all layers of society.*
- *Science is tolerated, in as much as it allows the monetization of new discoveries and inventions. When it challenges religious doctrine, it is frowned upon, declared dangerous and censored.*
- *Censorship in artistic expression is the rule, not the exception.*

- Non-whites do not exist as people.

- Homosexuals are imprisoned.

In general, this is the conceptual framework of conservatism. This is the springboard from which their discourse is launched. Granted, it has changed much over time and is now cloaked under such guises as “traditional and family values”, “religious and ethical morality”, “the supremacy of the markets”, “deregulation and globalization of business”, “support for our military” and so on.

In the end, if you really think hard about it, it is a question of power and a lament that power has been lost to all those who initially never had power over their own lives. Those who had to give away that power, as it had to be wrested from them with the blood of literally hundreds of millions of human beings, are definitely not content and want to conserve what they have or rather what they had, essentially to turn back the clocks of time.

The way to do that is by ultimately imprisoning ideas, creativity, human rights, artistic expression, and thoughts for social justice etc. etc. Reread human history after the Renaissance with this critical view and you will see it in a totally different light.

The human intellect only thrives upon redefining the boundaries of thought. By definition, creativity will want to reframe debates about art, culture, history, science, societal development, politics, and human rights. In a word, everything. There are no sacred cows for the human mind. There will always be someone who will want to challenge the status quo.

The human intellect and creative spark constantly want to make us see ourselves in a new light. We cannot help it. We have been genetically conditioned throughout millions of years of evolution to be problem solvers in order to survive. Creativity is the ultimate tool allowing for the adaptability of our species.

Conservatives have no interest in that. They want to conserve things the way they are, or rather the way they were. Oops, I forgot. Real conservatives do not believe in evolution.

I wish they spent their efforts trying to conserve the planet.

PART II

THE CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

PUBLIC GOOD AS A FOUNDATION OF THE CANADIAN EXISTENCE

It is always time for the public good. Especially in Canada.

Public good, as within the context of a broader concern for the well-being of society, as well as within the context of the public policy of a governing structure.

In his remarkable and unique analysis of Canada, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin (or Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century)*, published in 1997, the great Canadian author, essayist and philosopher John Ralston Saul convincingly argues that Canada, is actually an experiment in imagination about the public good. He theorizes that, for all intents and purposes, Canada should not be existing as a country because there are too many conflicting forces to tear it apart (English vs. French; West vs. East; rural vs. urban; the vast, resource rich and empty natural expanses of the North vs. the narrow population strip in the South that wants to exploit it; the “have” provinces vs. the “have-not”s; first nations vs. the European colonizers; the immigrant communities vs. the established ones; the proximity to an economic giant and militarily aggressive superpower and on and on). By any “rational” perspective, he argues, the country should have disintegrated within a few months of its inception. Yet Canada exists and is still one of the most desirable places to live in the world. At the time of the publication of the aforementioned book, Canada was actually at the top of the UN Human Development Index survey of countries. J. R. Saul further argues that part of the reason is that the Canada of today was not built by imperial conquest but rather by a gradual compromise of inclusion, in exchange for a participation in, and an extension of, the public good.

This is however in stark contrast with the philosophical underpinnings of a conservative and right-wing perspective, which can best be summarized in a few points of a general political platform.

1. Less government is good government, presumably because there are fewer opportunities to waste taxpayers' money.
2. Therefore, less government, i.e. a smaller government, should by definition imply lower taxation levels.
3. Less government also implies less influence over the affairs of the citizenry, their roles in society, their lives, their jobs, their health, their businesses.
4. The individual is the building block of society and the individual is glorified. Government should not interfere in the affairs of the individual, except to ensure their safety and safeguard their property. The rights of the individual almost always trump the rights of society, except in cases of criminal offence.
5. Investment is the key to prosperity, as it allows for the creation of jobs and wealth; therefore, the lesser a government interferes with businesses the better off the economy would be, as it will encourage investment by those businesses.

6. Culture, education, knowledge and any intellectual output is only relevant within the context of economic activity and how it creates financial wealth and prosperity.
7. Interference with business would include any process that would increase their costs; since costs are disincentives to investment therefore governments should not increase business costs by regulation, price controls, subsidies, worker right and wage legislation etc.

While there could be a few more of these, they are all related nuances of the mentioned ones; the differences between the various public policy platforms and flavours of conservatism are really about questions of degree. In other words, what is the shade of grey within the half a dozen or so points above?

The backdrop of this policy-based conservatism is always what I described in part I. The two are not disconnected. Why? Because, as you can see from this list, the fundamental underpinning of this policy platform is purely material and economic. The relationship between the citizen and society is defined purely in material terms. Taxation, investment, corporatism and trade. Power is defined as it relates to financial transactions. The disenfranchised are not entitled to any role in the power relationship, because by definition, they have no material value equivalent. There is no place for the public good in this construct. Community is irrelevant.

Now, if John Ralston Saul is right, and I am yet to be convinced otherwise, and public good is actually what is holding the country together, then the dismantling of the public good will actually destroy the foundations of the country. Remove the glue, remove the nails, remove the cement and mortar and your house will no longer hold together. In your pursuit of market efficiency and low costs, you would have reduced the cost of the maintenance of your house; but, not because you became actually very efficient, but because you no longer have a house. You are a street-person. The only thing you can do is sell off the wood, the bricks, the drywall, the plumbing and fixtures to scrap merchants.

This is further illustrated by how Canadians see themselves. When asked about their identity and how they differ from their American neighbours, very few, if any, mention historical events or forms of government (constitutional monarchy vs. republic). The distinctions that most commonly come up is that a) we have publicly funded health care, b) that we have almost free (or relatively very low cost) university education, c) that we are an officially bilingual country (i.e. highly tolerant of our minorities), d) that we follow a policy of multiculturalism (i.e. cultural diversity and integration vs. an American assimilatory melting pot), e) that we have gun control and f) that we have legal abortions and same sex marriages across our country; the more knowledgeable ones will add g) that we have a longer period of unemployment benefits, h) that we have a much more generous maternity and parental benefit program, i) that we do not have a history of military aggression against any country; and finally j) that we have higher taxes and k) that our entrepreneurs and brightest in our society would make much more money if they moved to the US. In other words, the vast majority of things that differentiate us from Americans that we attach any importance to as a society are related to the

Hence, not only is the public good the foundation of our country, it is also the key to our identity as a people; granted, not the only facet of our identity, linguistic identity of the French culture being another key one, but it would be at least as important if not more so.

I for one do not want this glue to disappear, neither rapidly nor gradually. I don't want anyone to pick off the pieces.

Who would pick off the pieces of my Canada? Those who want to sell it off today and those who want uncontrolled access to our resources. Not our oil, not our forests, but mainly our water. For financial gain now and for future economic and resulting political power. Water is the oil of the 21st century.

Historical landmarks in the evolution of the concept of public good in Canada

I am not of course arguing for an ideological position based solely on expenditures on the public good. A full welfare state would go immediately bankrupt, as Canada almost did in the late eighties and early nineties. I am arguing for a balance that does not neglect the public good but reinforces it instead. It turns out, so did many Conservative governments.

If we examine our history from the perspective of this notion of the public good, we can see that all the governments of Canada, including Conservative ones had a strong sense of it. In fact, Conservative governments contributed tremendously to it. Now this might sound contradictory to what I have been arguing, the question is why did this happen? The answer is simple. Because the population demanded it and any government that did not contribute to the public good, could no longer govern. In fact, the term Red Tory, as in a conservative who believes in the public good is actually almost exclusively a reference to a Canadian political philosophy.

The trend among Conservative governments actually stopped in 1988 with the second mandate of Brian Mulroney. The "Free Trade" government. Canadians soon realized their mistake and as a result, the Conservative party as we know it disappeared from the political landscape. Red Tories as a political force do not exist anymore because of that mistake.

Let us now look back at major milestones (only really major ones) in this process of building our country. Only achievements are listed, societal issues, debates that did not result in concrete results are not part of this list. Since this is just for illustration, I have not put in dates and other commentary (except a few that I could not resist). The list is chronological in order of Prime Ministers since confederation.

- *The cross-continental Canadian Pacific Railway, essentially uniting the Atlantic provinces with British Columbia. Achieved under John A. McDonald; a Conservative PM.*
- *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (or the RCMP- formerly called the North-West Mounted Police) extending the rule of law across vast swathes of uncharted Northern territories. Achieved under John A. McDonald.*

- - *The completion of the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. Achieved under Alexander McKenzie; the first Liberal PM, and the only one ever with working class roots. He was actually a stonemason. Arguably the most honest of all the Prime Ministers of Canada. He literally refused British knighthood three times.*
- *Introduction of the secret ballot in Parliament, also by Alexander McKenzie.*
- *Creation of the Supreme Court of Canada, also by Alexander McKenzie.*
 - - *Creation of the Office of the Auditor General, also by Alexander McKenzie.*
 - - *Creation of the Royal Military College, also by Alexander McKenzie.*
 - - *Creation of the Royal Canadian Navy. Achieved under Wilfrid Laurier, Liberal PM.*
 - - *Canada contributes to the building of the British Commonwealth and becomes an equal partner with the other Dominions. Achieved under Robert Borden, Conservative PM.*
 - - *Women achieve full voting rights (except in Quebec), also under Robert Borden.*
 - - *Agnes MacPhail, the first woman MP elected to Parliament in 1921; achieved under McKenzie King Liberal PM. She ran for the Progressive Party and later joined the CCF, the precursor of the NDP.*
 - - *CBC founded under R.B. Bennett, Conservative PM.*
 - - *Canada asserts independence from British Crown, between WWI and WWII as well as leading up to WWII, also by McKenzie King.*
 - - *Canada helps found the United Nations, also by McKenzie King.*
 - - *Canadian John Peters Humphrey of McGill University drafts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN; achieved under Louis St. Laurent, Liberal PM.*
 - - *Canada helps to establish NATO, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *Canada helps to solve the Suez Canal crisis, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *Canada is the main architect of UN peacekeeping , achieved by Lester Pearson, during the government of Louis St. Laurent. Pearson, then Foreign Minister, wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.*
 - - *Canada becomes a recognized middle power and a force for peace in the world, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *Canada Council for the Arts is created, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *Canada's social safety net is created, including family allowances, government funded university and post-secondary education and a very early form of public health services covering hospital expenses, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *The Supreme Court becomes the highest court in the land, and cases can no longer be appealed beyond it to Britain, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *The Canadian Parliament achieves the right to amend the constitution without resorting to debates in the British Houses, also by Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *Newfoundland joins the confederation, also under Louis St. Laurent.*
 - - *For the first time, the Governor General is appointed by the Canadian PM, not the*

British Sovereign, who only approves them, also by Louis St. Laurent.

- - Equalization payments are introduced, redistributing the revenues from wealthier provinces to “have-not” provinces, also by Louis St. Laurent.
- - Major infrastructure projects that essentially are the tools that have created the Canada of today are put in place like the TransCanada Highway, the St. Lawrence Seaway and the TransCanada Pipeline, also by Louis St. Laurent.
- - Canada fights against the inclusion of the apartheid regime of South Africa in the Commonwealth, under John Diefenbaker, Conservative PM.
- - Members of first nations recognized as citizens with voting rights, also by John Diefenbaker.
- - First aboriginal, James Gladstone, appointed to the Senate, also by John Diefenbaker.
- - The Canadian Bill of Rights, a federal statute and the main source of Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is introduced by John Diefenbaker.
- - Social and infrastructure programs extended to the far North, also by John Diefenbaker.
- - Alouette 1, the first Canadian satellite is successfully launched, making Canada the 3rd country in the world to launch a man-made satellite (after the USSR and the USA), also during the time of John Diefenbaker.
- - The Canada Pension Plan is introduced, under Lester B. Pearson.
- - Canada Student Loans is introduced, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - Universal Health Care is introduced modeled after and with the support of its initiator in Saskatchewan, Tommy Douglas of the NDP, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - The auto-pact with the US is implemented, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - A new Canadian flag, the maple leaf (without the Union Jack) is introduced by Lester B. Pearson. Canada celebrates its 100th anniversary.
- - Bilingualism becomes official federal policy and Canada is declared an officially bilingual country, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - Legal equality for women is introduced in all domains, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - The world’s first race-free immigration system based on a system of points is introduced, also by Lester B. Pearson.
- - The concept of a “Just Society” with several regional development initiatives is launched, by Pierre E. Trudeau, Liberal PM.
- - Terrorist cells of Quebec separatism are started down by the War Measures Act, also by Pierre Trudeau.
- - All federal institutions across the country become bilingual, also by Pierre Trudeau.
- - Canada pursues a totally independent foreign policy from the US, also by Pierre Trudeau.
- - Anik A1, the world’s first national domestic satellite is launched and brings the CBC to the Far North, also by Pierre Trudeau.

- - *Petro Canada, a crown corporation, is created, also by Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *Canada joins the G7, also under Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *National Energy Program instituted, also by Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *The Canadian Constitution was fully repatriated from Britain, also by Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is introduced as an integral part of the Canadian Constitution, also by Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *The National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization are completed, both being architectural masterpieces, also by Pierre Trudeau.*
- - *To fund government expenditures rather than cut them, 23 of 61 crown corporations are sold off, including Air Canada and Petro Canada; under Brian Mulroney, Conservative PM.*
- - *Canada vigorously opposes South African apartheid and is credited with its demise, by Brian Mulroney.*
- - *Canada leads the world to assist the famine victims in Ethiopia, Jo Clark, former Conservative PM and now Foreign Affairs Minister under Brian Mulroney is the main architect of this move.*
- *Canada stands up to the US against the Reagan interventions in Central America, under Brian Mulroney.*
- - *Apologies are made and compensation paid to Japanese Canadians for wartime injustices and internment in detainment camps, also by Brian Mulroney.*
- - *Goods and Services Tax is introduced, increasing the spending power of the federal government, also by Brian Mulroney.*
- - *The Free Trade agreement is signed with the US, and later expanded to NAFTA to include Mexico, also by Brian Mulroney.*
- - *First woman prime minister of Canada, and second woman to head a G7 country (after Margaret Thatcher), achieved by Kim Campbell, Conservative PM.*
- - *Federal \$42 billion per year deficit eliminated, under Jean Chretien, Liberal PM.*
- - *Clarity Act that defines the legal framework of the separation of a province and that stared down the Quebec separatists once again is introduced by Stephane Dion, Intergovernmental Affairs minister, under Jean Chretien.*
- - *An unprecedented (since Louis St. Laurent) five consecutive budget surpluses are recorded, due to the efforts of Paul Martin Jr. Finance Minister under Jean Chretien.*
- - *\$36 billion of the national debt is paid down, also by Jean Chretien.*
- - *\$100 billion in tax cuts are delivered, also by Jean Chretien.*
- - *The new and revamped Youth Criminal Justice Act is introduced, also by Jean Chretien.*
- - *The Ottawa Accord, the international treaty to ban land mines is signed by 158 countries largely due to the efforts of Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Foreign Affairs under Jean Chretien. Axworthy narrowly misses the Nobel Peace Prize which is offered to the*

NGO member coalition of the same team.

- - *Canada refuses to join the invasion of Iraq by the US, also under Jean Chretien.*
- - *Same sex marriage (Civil Marriage Act) is legalized in Canada, under Paul Martin Jr. Liberal PM.*
- - *The Kelowna accord, a historic agreement between the Federal government and first nations is signed, by Paul Martin Jr.*
- - *The Montreal round of the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is concluded with the signing on of the US, this is achieved by Stephane Dion, then Minister of the Environment under Paul Martin Jr.*

It has been really hard to select these achievements. But it would give you the perspective that I am talking about. Every single one of them is related ultimately to the public good. In fact, in the post WWII years, you can see that Canada tries very hard to project the concept of the public good across the world. This notion even applies to the NAFTA agreement. But more on that later.

As an interesting aside, and in keeping with the theme of the Red Tories, I would like to note that for a long period and well into the early twentieth century, the Conservative Party was actually called the Liberal-Conservative Party of Canada. This was done to accommodate liberal views, to distinguish it from stoic British conservatism, and to ensure that defectors from the Liberal party not only felt at home, but had an influence over policy. Perhaps in this lies another key of the Conservative Party uncharacteristically embracing the public good.

The Conservatives of course later merged with the farmer-based Progressive Party (the same one that gave us the first woman MP in 1921) to form the Progressive Conservatives. A name they kept until their complete absorption into the Canadian Alliance formerly known as the Reform Party founded by Preston Manning. The Conservatives of today have nothing to do with what has been achieved during the short history of the existence of our country. They are the ideological replica of what I have been arguing in Part I and in the beginning of this essay.

NAFTA or a road long travelled

Geography is destiny.

This is true for any country. The business mantra of location, location, location is doubly true for countries. The only difference being is that countries cannot just close shop and walk away. You have to make the best of what you have.

As J.R. Saul would argue, we Canadians seem to have made quite good out of our sort. For such a young nation, the above list is more than impressive. We have the world's most decentralized country that is literally stretched to the maximum with its internal tensions and yet, we are still doing relatively well. But for how long still?

Throughout our history, our governments have rightfully realized that the country is about an East-West axis at its Southern population strip and about a North-South axis internally. Meaning of course that the geographic tensions that develop internally are really about these two realities. How to unite the Southern strip across large distances and great contrast, while preventing an implosion and takeover by the US. And how to extend sovereignty to the far North that is largely empty and yet is also what defines our country, both in terms of economic potential and from the point of view of our identity. Almost all the efforts have been to extend the public good across these two axes. By using technology (transportation, and telecommunications), through institutions (CBC, the federal government, the RCMP) and through services and state assistance programs. The idea being that this tying together of the disparate landscapes will create a society of mutual support.

This cannot and could not have been done with a purely conservative ideology. Regardless of what you call the party in power. This can only be done by implementing the public good.

That is why, as J.R. Saul points out once again, every single government since confederation, has either governed from the center left of the political spectrum, or has been elected on a policy that was proposed from the left of the governing party. This included all the Conservative governments (except the one elected in 1988). As an example, the creation of the CBC was a very left-oriented proposition (under R.B. Bennett). Diefenbaker was actually elected on a platform that promised to outspend Louis St. Laurent's Liberals (which in of itself is difficult to imagine, as his predecessor St. Laurent's government was one of the biggest spenders - and without a deficit - in Canadian history). Saul further elaborates that if the above would not be possible, then the electorate put in power minority governments where the balance of power has been held by the left-wing parties such as the NDP, thus giving those governments the challenge to manage such a situation.

The question is again why? The reason is because ultimately, the electorate as well understood that our country is also built on the notion of the public good.

The "Free Trade" election of 1988 that put in place the 2nd government of Brian Mulroney came to redefine the concept of our continental geographical reality. At the bottom line, it proposed that our concept of ourselves and hence our government is not defined by the two axes that I outlined, but rather by a much larger North-South axis that carried goods and services across the continent. It suggested that our future prosperity does not lie within the enhancement of the public good within our country but rather it lies in a mercantilist approach of a commercial relationship with the world's economic and military superpower.

This proposition by the way was nothing new, several free trade proponents had been soundly defeated throughout our history. Including the very Liberal Wilfrid Laurier. Mulroney himself came to lead the Conservatives as an anti-free trader by defeating John Crosbie, the ardent supporter of free trade with the US.

As someone who has actually studied the Free Trade Agreement (I still have a copy in a DOS-based

Wordperfect file, as well as the printed version in several binders), I can say that the real achievement of the negotiations was not the notion of enhancement of trade with the US. The real achievement for Canadians was the putting in place of dispute resolution mechanisms that would be binding and that would level the playing field against aggressive protectionist legislation by US law makers. At least that was the principle.

In exchange though, we had to give up privileged access to our resources, redefine our view of ourselves and to wage an intellectual war whether our culture and hence the flowing notion of our identity was really just another part of what was collectively defined as the entertainment industry, and as such subject to NAFTA rules or not. In other words, the definition of our existence and relationship with ourselves as citizens in a society and collectivity was being turned into a purely economic one. Conservatism was back to its true ideological roots.

The end result of NAFTA is still the subject of much debate by economists. But some results are clear and undisputed.

Close to 80% of our international trade is dependent on a single country, the USA. From a business perspective, this would be the equivalent of having one customer. From an investor's point of view, it would be the equivalent of having shares not in a portfolio but of only one company. Basically no diversification and complete economic vulnerability to the point of almost being considered an economic hostage. Incidentally, this is a behaviour that is practiced by WalMart, the world's largest company, against its suppliers, who are completely dependent on and hostage to its pricing practices. Closer to home, just ask the investors who only held Nortel Networks shares.

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- In the current context of global economic meltdown, the bankruptcy of our single large customer is even more ominous and would probably reverse any economic benefit that might have accrued over the past twenty years. The economists will not have to debate much longer. While individuals might have been beneficiaries; at the macro level, our country will become a net loser.
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- The dispute resolution mechanism, while a great achievement for our negotiators (and an enhancer of the public good) proved to be unenforceable. For the simple reason that our partner just refused to abide by the agreement. Canada has repeatedly and solidly won almost every single dispute on the major economic issue of softwood lumber. The bigger irony is that the ideological right of a Harper government actually cites it as an achievement that they had to negotiate a side deal, essentially walking away from hundreds of millions of dollars of illegally imposed tariffs and setting a major precedence suggesting that bullying works in international trade deals which are not worth the paper they are written on. For all intents and purposes, the

dispute resolution mechanism is now a just a “paper tiger”.

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So now, twenty years later, we seem to be saddled with liabilities and have almost nothing to show for this major blunder.

The Denial of the Public Good and How to Achieve It

As Canadians, this fundamental denial of the public good is at our own expense as a people.

That is why the Conservatives of today (and Brian Mulroney of 1988) have a serious ideological dilemma. They carry the name of a party that has a long tradition of enhancing the public good; yet their policy agenda is a very strong replica of the initial points I made at the beginning of this essay. They can either choose to be dishonest with themselves or the electorate. They have chosen the latter.

The general electorate though is not easily duped. Hence the Conservative need to build alliances (pun intended) with the most unlikely group; Quebec separatism. That was true then with Brian Mulroney who gave us Lucien Bouchard, The Bloc Quebecois and the ensuing 1995 referendum which almost destroyed our country. It is true now with Stephen Harper who acknowledged a “Quebec nation” (leaving millions of francophones who have lived for centuries outside Quebec and have essentially built this country with a denial of their own identity).

In April 2008, in a scathing article titled One Canada or 10 Canadas? Sinclair Stevens, former minister in the cabinets of Jo Clark and Brian Mulroney outlines the evolution of the Harper policy agenda.

He points out how when referring to "Quebec's historical demands," Labour Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn suggested the following:

"The recognition of the Quebec nation within Canada allows us to think that we can put some meat around it, and that a majority government is more able to do a number of things, while being respectful of all of the provinces," Blackburn said in an interview. On the topic of constitutional change, he added: "When you're a minority, you never know what can happen, so it's not obvious to do that type of thing in the actual context."

Stevens goes further and shows a clear step-by-step progression of the same idea, the implementation of an ideological right policy as follows:

> How on Oct. 15, 1995, Reform Party leader Preston Manning and unity critic Stephen Harper presented Reform's "New Confederation" proposal, a package of 20 measures to modernize and

> "We propose measure **which will assert the autonomy of all provinces** and the power of the people well into the future," Harper said

> **Each of the 20 changes could be accomplished without comprehensive federal-provincial negotiations** of the sort that led to the failed Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. Reform's proposals simply required a federal government willing to act. "Canadians want change, not more constitutional wrangling," Harper said.

- > Earlier, speaking to a meeting of the National Citizens Coalition on May 24, 1994, Harper said: **"Whether Canada ends up with one national government, or two governments or 10 governments, the Canadian people will require less government no matter what the constitutional status or arrangements of any future country may be."**
- > In 1997, Harper and his confidant Tom Flanagan, writing in their Next City magazine, suggested that coalition-building was the only practical way for the right to seize national power. They said an alliance with the Bloc Québécois **"would not be out of place. The Bloc are nationalist for much the same reason Albertans are populists - they care about their local identity ... and they see the federal government as a threat to their way of life."**
- > In 2001, Harper proposed "a firewall around Alberta."
- > In October 2004, Harper made his "Belgian waffle" speech in Quebec City, suggesting that Canada should become a North American version of Belgium, which has autonomous regions. He was sympathetic to this "national autonomy" concept because **"Québécois never wanted to be an overwhelmed province in a centralized Canada."** Subsequent to Harper's speech, the Belgians had an election that left them so divided they were unable to form a government for more than eight months.
- > With little mainstream news comment, Harper - the day after his keynote speech at the Conservative policy convention in Montreal in March 2005- slipped a new section into the Conservative policy paper passed in Montreal. **For the first time in Canadian history, a national political party embraced a provincial rights agenda.** The section - Part D - **binds the party** "to ensure that the use of the federal spending power in provincial jurisdictions is limited, authorizes the provinces to use the opting out formula with full compensation if they want to opt out of a new or modified federal program, in areas of shared or exclusive jurisdiction. **Consider reforming Canadian federalism, taking into account: (a) the need to consolidate Quebec's position within the Canadian federation; (b) the need to alleviate the alienation felt by the citizens of the West."**

You can see the full article [here](#).

~~I have highlighted the parts that actually demonstrate the consistency in thought. Frankly, one wants consistency in thought in political leaders. It just happens that I do not want these thoughts to govern my country.~~

Because it is not his to give away.

The fact that the majority of Quebecers have already twice rejected the separatist option does not seem to bother Harper the ideologue, bothers me very much.

The fact that we are already the world's most decentralized country and any further decentralization could actually tear it apart, does not bother Harper the ideologue, bothers me very much.

The fact that Quebec already more than fully occupies all the room it can within a Canadian federation (with all of its full state structures such as control over immigration, a separate legal system, a separate taxation mechanism, a separate pension plan, even diplomatic representation abroad and at a tremendous cost of all of the above to Quebec taxpayers I might add) and that any further divorce from federal powers would actually send it into full statehood and destroy Canada does not bother Harper the ideologue, bothers me very much.

The fact that the denial of the public good, which defines Canada itself, and cannot be dismantled because it will mean the dismantling of Canada does not bother Harper the ideologue, bothers me very much.

He cannot help it though. **He is an ideologue.** Ideology is not to be confused with ideas. The latter are the outcome of human creativity. The former leads to propaganda. In its extreme form, it builds dictatorships. Communism and Fascism always start with propaganda to win sympathy. In recent history, just go back and see how Iraq was invaded. Healthy public discourse, the foundation of democracy is dismissed as inefficient and unnecessary.

Do I believe that Stephan Harper wants to poison Canadian with the listeriosis bacteria or kill them with nuclear reactor accidents? Of course not.

However, I know for a fact that he wants less government. He **believes** that less government is better. He **believes** that less regulation is better. He **believes** that governments should not intervene in the economy or any sector for that matter. He genuinely believes that it is better for our country as a whole and if most Canadians share his views, that is what he will set out to do. On the way to get there though, a true and open discourse must be held with the citizens. But that has not been the road chosen. The road chosen is advertising and the reduction of serious and complex matters into single and meaningless words "Leadership", "the prudent choice", "steady as she goes". In a sense, the image evoked wants to dumb down the electorate and frankly is quite offensive.

A real Conservative agenda, by the definition of conservatism itself, will want to do less inspection and policing. Can you say Walkerton? If your memory is short, it was the poisoning of drinking water by E Coli bacteria, in small Ontario municipalities in 2000 which led to several deaths. Because the

Conservative provincial government of Mike Harris had decided that municipal water supplies need not be inspected by higher provincial authorities and should “police themselves”. Can you draw parallels between the listeriosis outbreak that has now killed over twenty people and that one?

You do not have to believe the counter propaganda that Stephen Harper is the Canadian version of a George W. Bush. But the fact is that a) Harper did urge Canada to invade Iraq and b) just this year the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration of the US) grounded the fleet of American Airlines stranding thousands of passengers. United Airlines entire fleet of Boeing 777s was grounded immediately afterwards. Why is this relevant? Because it so happens that the Republicans implemented **severely reduced regulation** and airlines became responsible for “self-policing and self-inspection”. The FAA no longer sent inspectors in the field. Most of them were fired and the ones who were left became desk clerks who read the “reports” sent in by the airlines. Until a couple of whistle-blowers noticed some discrepancies and missing data in the reports suggesting fraud and blatant disregard for passenger safety. They reported it several times to their management but were dismissed. So they went to the media and mayhem followed.

You want more proof? Please dig deeper into the firing of the head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, Linda Keen. Just Google the story.

The Current Economic Crisis

It is rather ironic and blatantly disingenuous that the Conservative party is campaigning on being a better steward for the economy. **There is actually ZERO track record of that being true in Canadian history.** More duping of the electorate.

But furthermore, as the remarkable British commentator and political scientist John Gray points out, the current fall of the global economy is the equivalent of the shattering of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of Communism; on the other side of the spectrum of course. See his article in [The Observer here](#).

With the collapse of the fully free markets and the integrated global financial system things we have been repeatedly told by Conservative ideologues that are ultimate tools not only of prosperity but also the key to democracy itself (Question: how many times have you heard the neo-conservatives mention the words freedom, democracy and free-market economy in the same phrase? Answer: all the time), we find ourselves as a country to have been proven right.

That the public good does matter.

In fact, it is the only thing that matters and might be our sole option not only as a country, but also as a planet.

And that is why I cannot be a Conservative.

PART III

WHY I CANNOT BE A CONSERVATIVE: THE ARMENIAN PERSPECTIVE

By Viken Attarian P. Eng, MBA, Mount Royal QC

A. A Conservative's Public Statement about Conservatism

In a public interview (*Horizon Armenian Weekly*, October 6 2008), an Armenian candidate, running this year under the Conservative banner for Canadian parliamentary elections, said that although he was

~~a lifelong servant of the Liberal Party, he came to realize that most Armenians were of a~~ Conservative mentality, particularly after the vote on same-sex marriages passed in Parliament, after which he could no longer face questions of his children and hence that was one of the main reasons he switched allegiance.

Now this gentleman is fairly articulate. If you speak with him, you will immediately be struck by the impressiveness of his mastery of the spoken Armenian, English and French languages. It says on his website that he has studied political science and business administration and has a "rich public experience at municipal, provincial, federal and international levels" in several public service fields, ranging from immigration to status of women, from official languages to aboriginal issues and so on. The natural assumption should be that he at least understands the basics of the legislative process if not the details, and as a candidate who had a fair chance of getting into Parliament to "make the Armenian voice be heard in Ottawa" (as he publicly claimed in several speeches), his statements need to be taken very seriously indeed.

In the above mentioned excerpt he actually makes three distinct statements:

a) That he has served the Liberal Party of Canada.

b) That the issues of same-sex marriage made him face his personal conscience and he could not face that reality as a Liberal, suggesting that he was personally opposed to the matter (i.e. that Liberals forced it on the population and that Conservatives have a more principled approach to this issue).

c) That Armenians are in general of a Conservative mentality, therefore suggesting that he would feel more at home within the Conservative Party.

I will not comment on part a) as that is of course a personal matter of definition. What does "service" mean? Whether it includes employment or not? In what proportions? 20% volunteerism and 80% paid positions or the reverse? The assumption should always be that he is truthful.

As for part b) I would like to state that at best, it represents a profound misunderstanding of the Canadian legislative process; at worst, it would be an even profounder misleading of the Armenian electorate. Here is why:

i) Marriage and civil union is actually a provincial jurisdiction from a ceremonial perspective.

No Canadian-Armenian I know can show me a marriage certificate issued by the Federal government. Federal legislation on the topic defines the overall legal framework of how rights and obligations flow from the definition of marriage, to ensure uniformity of treatment of the topic across the country, and to ensure the protection of rights. **In this specific case, Quebec and seven other provinces and jurisdictions (i.e. the vast majority of the Canadian jurisdictions) had already either**

~~passed legislation legalizing civil same-sex marriages and had in fact enforced all other aspects related to the matter~~ (e.g. spousal pensions, disability benefits etc.), **or their highest courts had pronounced in favor of legalizing same-sex marriages on the basis of non-discrimination.** As far as the suggested “outrage” goes, the time for it had long been in the past.

ii) **Any Supreme Court decision automatically creates new law;** that is the reason why that court chooses the cases it takes on very carefully and takes great care in explaining the decisions. It does not want to create legislative vacuum. Grace periods are allocated to Parliament to bring legislation in-line with the court decisions and so on. In the specific case of same-sex marriage, **the Supreme Court had already pronounced an opinion on the matter and not only had they explained that defining same-sex marriage would be legal and within the broader legislative jurisdiction of Parliament, but that the religious freedoms defined in the Canadian Charter of Rights would protect religious officials and communities, should they refuse to perform them.** Therefore, in the end, the issue was a matter of detail as to who voted for and who voted against. **Parliament had no choice but to enact it,** because by not doing so, it would have gone against the Supreme Court and, under the current level of division of powers with vast decentralization given away to the Provinces, it would have made the Federal government unable to ensure the application of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Something, which is its constitutional duty to uphold.

iii) The actual piece of legislation is called *The Civil Marriage Act*; note the title of the act. It is only relevant to **civil** marriage; in fact, **it goes to great length to ensure that the rights of religious communities and institutions are protected and that they are not forced to perform religious ceremonies that they feel would go against their religious principles.** Therefore, to suggest that Canadian law brought in by a Liberal government actually could force Armenian churches to perform same-sex marriages is either blatantly ignorant or just a gigantic lie of Goebbelsian proportions. Furthermore, some religious congregations, themselves bitterly divided over the issue, have actually split up; for example, some congregations in the Anglican Church of Canada have decided to allow such marriages in a religious ceremony and some have decided not to. To further suggest, as some of our religious leaders have done so, that this matter is uniformly antichristian and therefore un-Armenian (whatever that may mean) is not having one’s facts straight.

iv) The real issue is not even related to homosexuality. The **real issue in this case is related to the rights and privileges that flow in matters like taxation, pension legislation, disability and insurance benefits, inheritance rights etc. that result from the definition of marriage and what such a committed relationship entails.** Marriage is defined in a variety of forms of legal contracts and rights as well as different types of sharing of different assets etc etc. Armenians might not know it or understand it (except that those contractual details hit them in the face when they get divorced), but ignorance of the law is no excuse. In **fact, it is up to our so-called leaders to educate our community about these issues, and up to our representatives (especially**

~~electd ones !!!) to ensure that we understand the laws of the land we live in. The other~~
alternative is of course to keep them ignorant of reality because ignorance allows for easier manipulation.

So much for points a) and b) but, **I think the candidate in question is making a profound statement in his point c).**

This, of course, regardless of the fact whether he is expressing a personal conviction or suggesting that he would have a better chance of being elected as a Conservative because of an ideological position of the electorate. If he is truthful, and he was a Liberal for twenty years, then at least for some of that period he must have been living with a personal lie. **His statement about Armenian conservatism though merits very serious analysis.**

B. The Origins of Armenian Conservatism: Tribalism, Subjugation, the Armenian Church and Anti-secularism

The conservative mentality has deep roots in the Armenian community both in the Diaspora, and in Armenia proper.

I think that this kind of worldview has its roots in four other concepts that have been a key part of our history and have shaped our identity. Furthermore, these four concepts are not in isolation but have in the past, and also largely in the present, interacted in a mutually reinforcing way to entrap our thought and to limit the way we look at ourselves today.

1. The first is tribalism. Tribalism is the seed form of nationalism. It does not necessarily always evolve as such, but all forms of nationalism have germinated from a historical tribal origin. It could be argued that monolithic nation-states like Armenia, of almost exclusively a single ethnicity, actually come the closest to a tribe; both from the point of view of its identity and from the point of view of collective behavior.

I chose tribalism, because **the tribe does not tolerate dissent from existing structures, rituals and social norms.** Why? Because a tribe has determined that whatever is its state it is the optimal for survival. That is why tribes are vulnerable since they cannot rapidly adapt to changing conditions. In the modern world, all tribes or groups manifesting tribal behavior are doomed to become extinct. It

is not a question of if, but of when.

A tribe is essentially the human equivalent of an ant colony. Ant colonies have evolved to a quasi-stable evolutionary behavior over millions of years and it would be hard to imagine them otherwise. I have one of the trees in my backyard infested by carpenter ants. My gardener tells me that the best way to get rid of them is to feed them syrupy water laced with boric acid, by putting it in a couple of dishes around the tree. The worker ants always carry the nutrition to their queen and they will feed her poison until she dies. Once she dies, the colony will leave as it will lose the purpose of its existence. The evolutionary progression of carpenter ants has not prepared them for human assault based on treachery.

Why are tribes formed? The anthropological answer is, to cooperate to control access to scarce resources like land, water and food. This would also mean to deny those resources to those outside the tribe, and to protect the tribe from external aggression of other tribes. **Tribalism, as a raison-d'être, divides the world into US and THEM.**

Tribalism is a typical reaction of groups under siege (or who think they are under siege). Now, that aggression could be real or could be imagined, but tribalism is also invoked by those who are in a privileged position within the tribe to either continue to hold that position or to expand it. In other words, **they control by invoking fear.** In the extreme case, tribal behavior leads to xenophobia, racism and even genocide. Almost all of these reprehensible positions are the results of ultra-nationalism which in its essence adopts the lowest form of tribal behavior.

Individualism and free thinking have no place in a tribe. It has no use for it and deems it downright dangerous. **Extreme conservatism is the norm.** That is why Nazis hated culture. So did Stalinists and Ittihadists and Kemalists and Falangists and Fascists. So did the Catholic Inquisition that stifled scientific thought. Burning of dissenters at the stake is ultimately a tribal "invention".

Does this mean that an evolution of tribal attitudes is never justified? Of course not. **One of the reasons Armenians are tribal is because they have been truly under siege and have been on the verge of extermination.** The threat to our existence has been and continues to be very real. In a sense, our geography demands tribalism. However, **tribalism carries in itself the seeds of its own destruction** for two reasons a) Because it eliminates dissent and hence opportunities to learn to face newer threats and b) The siege mentality creates tremendous opportunities for demagogues, dictators, false prophets, fake Messiahs, snake oil salesmen and all the other panoply of fraudsters and power hungry "leaders" to exploit the tribe. **Since critical thinking is eliminated, mind control is**

very easy.

Both Armenia and the Diaspora suffer from both of these syndromes. That is the reason why they are still struggling with the implementation of democracy in Armenia, although many are arguing that it is because we have not had enough time after over 70 years of Communist rule. They fail to realize that, historically, **successful democracies have been implemented in Latin America or Africa after centuries of colonial rule** within a comparable time frame. Another such example would be India, the world's largest democratic state.

The Diaspora has actually never had a single successful example of democratic institutionalization (those who think that the church is democratic, please read paragraph 3. of this section). This is even more striking, since a large part of the Diasporan Armenian population has been living over half a century in Western liberal democratic societies. I believe that tribalism is the main culprit here as well. An attitude of  - *haygagan eh, badvagan eh* ("what is Armenian, is always honorable"), which pushes any institutional critique or organizational attempt at critical review into the margins.

In a striking example of tribalism, when I and several others decided not to support the above-mentioned candidate, we were branded by some of our community "leaders" as "traitors to our nation". At least one of us was actually physically assaulted by a gang of about ten goons sent by a known community organization. And this happened in Canada, in October of the year 2008. One of my good friends actually told me that regardless of who the candidate is and regardless of his/her personal qualities and regardless of his/her political positions, it is our duty to support them because he/she is an Armenian. **This is a clear illustration of tribalism, because it is essentially saying that opinions do not matter, policy does not matter, personal qualities do not matter, freedom of thought does not matter**, furthermore it clearly suggests that I as a person, even with a long and public track record of not only serving the community but working for helping Armenia and the cause of Genocide recognition, I would be branded a "traitor" and hence physical violence would be justified against me or others who are also independent thinkers.

In an extreme related analogy of such tribalism, one would rightfully conclude that electing Armenians into the Ottoman Parliament ultimately did not help any Armenians in the Empire whose "leaders" had essentially decided to cooperate with the CUP. Who was opposed to this position? The legendary General Antranig. His reward for this lucidity was expulsion from the ranks of the ARF in the 1907 Congress of Vienna!!!

2. The second reason for the inherent conservatism of Armenians is subjugation. Conquered people are essentially conquered by their spirit. Subjugation is the loss of that spirit, as the conquered subject becomes only worried about one thing. Physical survival.

The Armenian spirit **was** conquered by the Ottomans and later by the Stalinists. Likely through the extreme violence perpetrated throughout the earlier period of the Ottoman conquest. We know what the later period brought. The greatest of all crimes, The Genocide.

Subjugation also differs from tribalism, because **ultimately, any conquered people are kept conquered with two extremely effective methods. A network of informants, and a “ruling” elite from within them to ensure the continuation of the conquest.** This is the only way empires can survive. King Herod was a member of such a co-opted elite during Roman times. The British Empire was kept alive in India due to the “tolerance of the rule” of the *maharajas*. The Nazis always put in local collaborators in charge, even among the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. The American empire of modern times has left CIA supported tin-pot dictators all over the globe. The Soviets ruled by local Communist chiefs in the Soviet republics and the other Eastern European countries. This is a much more cost-effective method of control than stationing vast armies in all the territories. The ultimate purpose of these two methods to subjugate is to ensure that a) the financial wealth and economic resources of the conquered is transferred to the conqueror and b) that the conquered are kept under control not to rebel, not to think about their collective future, not to aspire for improvement of their sort and so on. And of course, the local intermediaries acquire part of the transferred wealth but mostly also get a certain “leadership” status. If they do not fulfill their function, then they are immediately replaced.

Who has played this role in assisting the conquerors in our subjugation? **It could very well be argued that since we lost our last historical state (The Kingdom of Cilicia) in 1375, that role was largely played by the Armenian Church.** It came to be viewed as the replacement of the state, occasionally acted as our tax collector, and in Ottoman times, that role that it played was finally enshrined in the Ottoman legislation as the *millet* (community) system for non-Moslems. It recognized the Patriarch of Constantinople as the highest authority representing the Armenian Ottoman subjects in all matters, whether religious or secular or political and the only institution that had official direct access to the Sublime Porte or the Sultan himself.

During the Stalinist regime, that same role was played by local party chiefs and Commissars in Armenia. In the Diaspora, that role was transferred to the political parties co-opted by the CIA and the KGB.

Another example of a country actually governed to this day by *millet*-ism is the country that was my birthplace, Lebanon. Its governance is built around structures of religious communities. Secterianism is king. The notion of citizenry and the rights and privileges that flow from it is only relevant within

the context of their religious affiliation. We all know the consequences.

If you look at the common thread amongst all of these structures in the appropriate time periods, you will rapidly notice two prominent characteristics. Firstly, an extreme conservatism that tries to keep and literally enforce the status quo, secondly a major disdain for free thinking and critical analysis. While you could argue that it is natural for any structure in power to resist its opponents, these ones had the additional task and a whole raison-d'être to assist other masters. If you overlay this reality with a network of informants, you could perhaps reach a conclusion that they did not have much choice. I happen to think otherwise, as we have remarkable exceptions that have shown great courage; these include people like His Holiness Khrimyan Hayrig, His Holiness Karekin I Hovsepian, Yeghishe Tcharents, Shahan Natali, Antranig Dzarougian and many others. These people made tough choices in favor of a critical approach to the issues they were facing.

Therefore, the structures that perpetuated and assisted in our subjugation, by their very nature, must be conservative. That is why Hagop Baronian starved to death. That is why Gostan Zarian and Shahan Shahnour, the two greatest Armenian writers of modern times were both vilified by the Armenian established structures. That is why many of our intellectuals were literally denounced to the Ittihadists and the Stalinists.

3. The third agent of conservatism is the Armenian Church. By this I mean the Armenian Apostolic Gregorian Church that is one of the oldest in the world and has now been around for over 17 centuries. **Conservatism of course is part of any Orthodox religious dogma.** And since, the Armenian identity is very much wrapped around the concept of this church, its institutions, its traditions and so on, therefore its impact on the Armenian psyche is more than profound.

There is however an untold and hence lesser known story of our people which is this. **For close to one thousand years of those seventeen centuries Armenia was the cradle of amazing social reformist movements based on different interpretations of Christianity.** From the 3rd century AD and up to the 13th, the region of Armenia has been the birthplace of vast heretical movements inspired by Gnostic Christianity that had converts among millions of Armenians and whose influence extended all the way to the Byzantine emperors, the two major of these movements being the Paulicians and the Thontracites. These heretical doctrines (by the measure of their times) espoused concepts such as the equality of sexes, inheritance rights for women, the right of women to choose who to marry, a simpler and populist conduct for the clergy, and an interpretation of the Holy Scriptures based on concepts of social justice and resource sharing, rejection of dogmatic ritual and religious intermediary in favor of a direct interlocution with God and so on. **In short, these concepts were extremely forward looking for their period and had a long term influence on European reformist movements of later times** like the Cathars, the Bogomils, and all the way to

the Protestant Reformation.

Needless to say that **the Armenian Church, in alliance with the ruling class of the time, waged a war of extermination against these dissenters.** Their campaigns included vicious propaganda, forced conversions, torture and downright murder that would number in the tens of thousands per incident. Still, to imagine that even with such violence perpetrated against them, these movements managed to survive close to a thousand years, so how deeply rooted they must have been among the population. This part of the history of the Armenian Church remains to be discovered and analyzed, but more than clearly demonstrates the level of conservatism our church espouses and the lengths it would go to for the preservation of the status quo. A feat that was slightly later matched and exceeded by no lesser an institution than the Catholic Church, its wars, its Inquisition and its intrigues.

One could further argue that the true Ottoman subjugation period arrives at the tail end of this period, i.e. in the late 14th century and by that time, the population had been so exhausted and intellectually, spiritually and militarily depleted that it became easy prey to the invading hordes. It is in this period that the Church essentially became the de facto stand-in for an Armenian state and by the 19th century was ready to step in as the legal structure that takes over that function fully.

To further illustrate this institutional conservatism, it is interesting to note that **the last organizational reform of the Armenian Church dates back to the 19th century inspired largely from the Ottoman *millet*-ist structure and is touted as a great democratic achievement, it is called the National Constitution (☒ - *Azkayin Sahmanatroutyoun*); on the Russian Tzarist regime side (Eastern Armenia) it is called *Polozhenie (Statutes)* and was put in place in 1836.** Notice that none of these nomenclatures in anyway suggest that they are about the governance of a church. Imagine if the regulations governing the Church of England were called the National Constitution. That would be unthinkable.

4. The fourth and final force for conservatism is the strong anti-secularism among Armenians, in Armenia and especially in the Diaspora.

The anti-secularist behavior comes primarily from the domination of the Church in the Diasporan governance structures. **Most Armenians regard their church leaders as the head of the community.** As explained earlier, this is largely caused by the historical unfolding of the role of the Church. In Armenia, because religious freedom was largely suppressed during the Communist period, a return of those freedoms has now swung the pendulum in the completely opposite direction, once again reinforcing the position of the Church.

The other main reason is that because of the disappearance of our intellectuals, due to successive waves of murder and persecution, the concept of a civic society (whether in the Diaspora or Armenia) based on a secular discourse has neither had the time to form nor the opportunity to hold root.

This leadership and institutional void has been filled by the most obvious candidate, the Church, basically getting us right back where we started from. That is the mutually reinforcing result of these forces that feed Armenian conservatism. A Diaspora that embraces a secular worldview would allow a very serious questioning of itself and its tenets, its beliefs about equal rights for everyone, its educational structures and contents, its self organization and so on. A Diaspora where the fundamental organizational definition revolves around a religious doctrinal axis can only be what it is today. That is why many Diasporan institutions, even when they are secular, feel that they need the official seal of approval of a Catholicos or an Archbishop or a Bishop. That is why, the lion's share of expenditures in the Diaspora, donations and community investment projects are based on church construction and/or church-based initiatives.

C. Long Term Attitudes towards Intellectual Output

In a lecture I gave at Columbia University in March of 2008, I argued that the modern day Armenian intellectual has disappeared from the Diasporan public stage, largely because there is actually no more demand for Armenian intellectuals. You can download that lecture in its entirety from my download site [here](#).

However, that is only part of the picture. While Armenians like to project the image of a nation that has produced a lot of intellectuals, and of international caliber at that, it is still very debatable whether our intellectuals are taken seriously or even listened to at all.

All writers and free thinkers of all nations have their respective detractors. In the case of Armenians, our intellectuals have been persecuted, despised, exiled and murdered by our oppressors, but also denounced, isolated and literally starved to death by fellow Armenians. Shahnour and Zarian, the two greatest Armenian writers were viciously attacked to the very end.

This anti-intellectualism leads to interesting wide spread phenomena. In the absence of any strong state or organizational constructs with any semblance of legitimacy, **there is also a wide absence of accountability towards the community.** Accountability not only in the financial sense, but in the sense of decision making that impacts the community itself. For example, many community "leader"s speak in the name of the whole community essentially suggesting that there is such legitimacy when there is none. When bishops or chairmen or presidents speak in the public media they do not speak in the name of their respective organizations, they speak in the name of the whole or part of the community. This is quite frustrating to anyone who pays serious attention.

Another example is the **haphazard approach to institution building** (or dismantling) without public consultation. Churches, schools, community centers etc. are built, sold off, dismantled or shut down **with a decision making process that is extremely closed and is usually taken by the very few in charge.** Yet those decisions impact the lives of all the community and its future.

Furthermore, the fundraising for these institutions is also largely done from within the communities who again have no say in how these institutions evolve in the end. **This would be the equivalent of taxation without any representation.**

Finally, there is the “living in a bubble syndrome”. Recently, a good and erudite friend of mine told me that as he regularly reads the Diasporan Armenian mass printed media, he was stunned that the main issues of the day of the countries that these media are published in are rarely, if at all reflected in them. There is almost no coverage of big societal debates there (e.g. the issue of same-sex marriage in Canada, the coverage of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, environmental issues and how to tackle climate change). **It is as if the community is completely isolated from the outside world.** This was a startling observation reflective of the state of the tribal existence of the community. When was the last time any of our community centers actually held public debates on these key topics of the day? When was the last time we had public political debates (as in politics of the countries we live in) in any shape or form in our centers or church basements? When was the last time that our traditional organizations and media, whether print or electronic had any reader or listener input, published letters to the editor, had a comment section on their websites? This could of course be explained by the fact that the average Armenian does not care to write, comment or express an opinion. I happen to believe otherwise, but even if this were true, it would demonstrate how we as a community have reached a point of apathy and are now mere “consumer”s in the eyes of our “leadership”. The role of us as people is only relevant when we are solicited for funds. Again, taxation without any representation whatsoever.

Why is this related to anti-intellectualism? Because in the absence of organizational checks and balances, the critical thinkers, the intellectuals, the ones who think beyond the boundaries of their tribes provide the healthy stimulus to allow the other members of the community to think critically as well. Hence our thinkers, rare as they are, have a doubly important role, to hold a mirror to our face to allow us to see ourselves the way we are.

And perhaps therein lies the reason they are disliked. As demonstrated by Part I of this essay, in the vast majority of cases, intellectuals cannot be conservatives. In fact, it would almost be a contradiction.

Armenian conservatism has successfully driven away the Armenian intellectuals. Unfortunately, we ignore them at our own peril. Every society that has eliminated critical thinking has either disappeared or has been relegated to the status of a third, fourth or even fifth world society. Today, we are definitely in that company and descending down the ladder.

D. Education, Demographics and the Multiple Solitudes They Create

From the high level perspective of organized populations, **the Diaspora can be viewed as two**

“substructure”s. One that is “organized” around the traditional institutions, mainly the Church, and then the traditional political parties, the schools, the community centers etc. Along with a second “substructure” that is more fluid, less organized in the traditional sense but that can be arguably mobilized around key issues, e.g. Genocide recognition, helping Armenia etc.

From a demographic perspective, it is increasingly clearer that the second group is the one that is likely larger in numbers, is more affluent, particularly in the communities of the Western liberal democracies, is more educated and also most likely of a younger average age.

Now, if we assume that this is a realistic representation, we can see that **the demographic inertia is in favour of the second group. However, the organizational vehicles which can act and channel the energy of the community are permanently locked in the old ways that reject innovation**, as outlined above. The organizational structures will be of a more conservative outlook, both on a political compass, and from approaches to issues facing the community. Yet, the growing demographic force pushes us away from Conservatism. **This is a source of serious conflict.**

It is precisely for this reason that the youth are not present in Diasporan institutions. Exceptions only confirm the overall trend. The youth are disinterested because they are ultimately in a conflict and they see no common ground between who they are as individuals and what the traditional institutions stand for. That is also why the fewer and fewer youth who are active become eventually disinterested, disillusioned and usually leave never to come back.

This could also be the reason that explains our “dividedness”. The traditional organizations continuously trumpet that we do not have “unity”. **But their version of unity is understood to mean hegemony of ideas.** This is fundamentally unacceptable for the second group, especially within the lack of the larger context of any truly representative and publicly accountable structure with any legitimacy. The prediction of course being that such a “unity” will never be achieved within the current framework of any traditional organizational structure. Therefore, spending time and resources on trying to achieve them is at best a Quixotic quest. At worst, it is a waste of severely limited resources.

From the perspective of Armenia, the two larger societal divisions are actually the “haves” and the “have-not”s. The former are only interested in accumulating wealth and power at any cost. Any political position is therefore filtered purely through this specific prismatic view, and hence by definition they will be major resisters to any initiative that can challenge that position. Therefore, they will be of a conservative outlook. That is largely why the numerous political parties in the Armenian Parliament are either mostly of a right-of-center ideology or nationalistic or ultra-nationalistic. **The “have-not”s are actually devoid of any power.** The only interesting characteristic of the “have-not” group is that it is now also largely populated with the older and now increasingly with newer intellectuals that have the brain power to sustain a deeper discourse of

societal evolution. What will be the outcome, or whether they will become at all relevant remains to be seen.

E. Examples of “Thinking Outside the Box”: Failures and Successes

It would however be intellectually dishonest to present a picture of the evolution of Armenian history from the conservative perspective alone. The fact remains that throughout the course of the past 3-4 centuries we have seen several attempts at anti-conservatism. This would be termed today as thinking outside the box (lateral thinking).

Not all of these attempts were successful, **in fact some had downright disastrous outcomes for us as a people**; the latter would include the adoption of a European socialist political ideology by our older political parties from outside the Ottoman Empire, which essentially tried to bring in a discourse based on a working class that had been “revolutionized” in a capitalistic manufacturing and production facilities and then to forcefully overlay it on a largely backwards, illiterate, feudal and Medieval social setting based on a purely oppressive and violent Ottoman power structure. Yervant Odian does much better than anyone else in satirizing this with his immortal  - *Unger Panchoonie* (Comrade Panchoonie). This was either “incredibly brave or incredibly stupid” as popular wisdom would characterize it, but it definitely was not very smart. The incident at the Ottoman Bank and the collaboration by the ARF with the CUP would fall under the same category.

All of the above are actually the result of extreme short-sightedness and show a lack of proper evaluation of both tactical and strategic alternatives of the times. **I think that we must accept that these moments in history belong to all Armenians, not just to a faction, and we must be able to analyze them critically with the modern intellectual tools at our disposal. To date, we have either mythologized this history, or dismissed it; neither approach leading to any improvement of our sort.**

There are at least four other cases, of our relatively recent history, which merit close scrutiny. All of them would appear to be projects with no initial hope of success. All of them were in fact successful and have literally saved us as a people. These successes occurred because of lateral thinking, but also because their initiators looked at our historical evolution and conceived a vision of our future as **a very long-term strategic option**. Thus steering us towards those options gradually and one small step at a time, making many adjustments along the way. **They chose a heading instead of a specific short-term goal.**

1. The first of these examples is the case of Israel Ori. He was a unique character in our history

of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Imagine an Armenian from the backward Syunik region (granted the son of a *Melik*), almost single handedly planning to achieve the liberation of Armenia from under the Ottoman and Persian yokes, through the assistance of Western powers. He ends up serving in the army of Louis the XIV, achieving high favor with the political circles there, then moving on to Dusseldorf, befriending the German prince who in turn refers him to the Austrian Emperor, and then on to befriend the Prince of Florence, and Pope Clement XI, all the while, throughout these years, “lobbying” for the liberation of Armenia, and by the way shuttling back to Armenia and again to Europe. Finally learning the greatest of the lessons of diplomacy, that for states to help other people, there should be common interests at play. Once again, arriving at the correct conclusion that Russia would be the only great power that would have interest in the Caucasus, he departs for Moscow to meet Peter the Great to deliver to him the request of Armenians and Georgians to be liberated from Turkish and Persian rule. Further on, once securing agreement, he actually uses his military knowledge to logistically plan the deployment of the Russian forces into the Caucasus. Even more, he volunteers to go to Armenia leading a fact-finding mission, essentially acting as a spy for the Russians in Persia, to map out the terrain for the advancement of the Russian army.

Ori died suddenly in 1711 in Astrakhan at the age of 53. It is due to his efforts that the attention of the Russian court turned towards the Caucasus, and the Russians realized that they would have Armenians as long term allies in the region. His dream was realized about a century later by the advancement of Russian rule into what was then Eastern Armenia. One could argue that although the Tsarist rule was not easy on Armenians, they were certainly better off than their fellow countrymen in Iran or the Ottoman Empire. The core of the population of Eastern Armenia was likely preserved due to this turn of historical events, and perhaps as a result, even the existence of the Armenia of today could be traced back to the efforts of the visionary Israel Ori.

2. The second example of lateral thinking within a strategic vision is that of Fr. Mekhitar Sepasdatsi, the founder of the order of the Mekhitarist monks.

Fr. Mekhitar was of course from Sebaste or Sepasdia, he founded his order in Constantinople in 1701 and in 1715 moved to Venice. There he negotiated to be granted an abandoned island outside the boundaries of the city. The reason that this island was abandoned is because it used to be a quarantine station and a leper colony.

Imagine Fr. Mekhitar settling with his monks on this island. Imagine the hardships of simply living there in the early eighteenth century. Imagine how the place was provisioned with food and water in those times. It must have taken several hours by boat just to get there. Let alone the stigma of leprosy that hung over the place. Imagine how the monastery was literally built by the hands of Mekhitar and his seventeen monks.

The Mekhitarist order transformed the Armenian reality. From that remote location in Italy, for close to three centuries, a beacon of intellectual light shone throughout the darkness of the Armenian existence. The island of St. Lazarus became the center of an intellectual activity that remains unmatched to this day in Armenian history, except perhaps for the Golden Age after the invention of

the modern Armenian alphabet in 405 AD. The Mekhitarist Order literally invented the structure of modern Western Armenian, and contributed tremendously to its philological and linguistic evolution. They embarked on a superhuman effort of research and publication in linguistics, grammar, history, language evolution and so on. They published monumental dictionaries. They published Western Armenian translations of the great writers of the time. They even taught Armenian to Lord Byron. They also prepared generations of teaching monks who throughout the history of the order established dozens of schools in Armenian communities around the world and in Armenia. These schools have graduated hundreds of thousands of students. The order published literary and cultural periodicals that kept qualitative pace with the leading international publications of their time. Then, an offshoot of the order established itself in Vienna. For close to two hundred years, the printing presses of the Mekhitarist order were second to none in the world. The combined libraries of the two orders today hold more than 350,000 volumes of books, many of them being unique and ancient publications. The combined scriptural treasury of the Mekhitarists includes more than 6700 illuminated manuscripts (i.e. equivalent to more than the 2/3 of the ancient manuscripts of the great scriptorium in Yerevan, the Madenataran). Many of the monks, like Fr. Ghevont Alishan, became great literary figures. The Renaissance of Armenian language and culture of the nineteenth century, especially that of Western Armenia, can be said to be almost exclusively the achievement of the Mekhitarists.

The greatest of all the Mekhitarist schools, and perhaps of all Armenian schools ever, became the boarding school of Moorat-Raphaelian in Venice proper (named after rich Armenian merchant benefactors from India, Agha Samvel Mgrditch Moorat and Edward Raphael). Throughout the 162 years of its existence it retained one of the highest academic standards in the world and graduated thousands of our community leaders in every field, including some of our greatest writers, intellectuals and political leaders.

Fr. Mekhitar would arguably qualify as one of the greatest Armenians who ever lived. Equal in stature to none other than St. Mesrob Mashdots. He died in 1749 and is buried in St. Lazarus. **Three centuries of incredible contributions to our nation, from a vision built around an abandoned leper colony.** How lateral and anti-conservative is that.

3. The third example is the one of a much better known institution, the Armenian General Benevolent Union or AGBU.

The general history of the AGBU is widely known, and its impact and prevalence in our communities and in Armenia is well understood. However, the radical issues surrounding its founding and the nation saving impact it had during the post-Genocide period is not appreciated by the general public. The context of the founding of the AGBU is very important. Here was a philanthropic organization being founded in 1906 in Cairo (which was at the time under British rule) mostly by dissidents from the Ottoman Empire. Its basic concept was to introduce education and emancipation into the feudal and poor hinterland of the Ottoman territory, to assist Armenian families living on the historical lands,

~~to encourage them to stay in their villages and to learn trades in order to discourage migration to the~~ large urban centers. **This was an unprecedented initiative in its kind and in magnitude.** Furthermore, to achieve this, **it was decided to build a unique corporate structure, based on funds and donations earmarked for specific projects,** again never before attempted by any Armenian organization; the third characteristic was **an apolitical as well as a totally secular approach,** the purpose being twofold, to encourage participation of all Armenians from all denominations around the world in this initiative, and to ensure that the Ottoman power structure does not feel threatened politically, particularly because the idea required a mobilization of the population around local chapters to be founded in the Ottoman territories.

Remembering that the founding of the AGBU coincided with one of the bloodiest periods in Armenian history, it is equally amazing how the concept captured the imagination of the majority of the Armenian population of the time. Considering that the Armenian political parties (the Armenagans, the Henschagians and the ARF) had similarly tried to establish themselves among the backward villagers, while running their political organizations from outside the Empire and that they had failed dismally, this achievement by the AGBU is striking. By 1909, the AGBU had chapters in Constantinople, Smyrna, Magnesia (suburb of Smyrna), Mersin, Bursa, Sivas, Erzinjan, Diyarbekir, Aleppo, Ankara, Harput, Erzerum and Dardanelles. In 1913, there were over 80 officially registered chapters in the Ottoman Empire!!!! The reason for this success vs. the previous failure of the political parties is twofold. **The AGBU came to fill in a great need for social support among the population, and its operational model fitted with the needs of the times, inspiring full trust among the donor communities worldwide.** The change desired by the AGBU was truly to be brought about over the very long term. It was actually designed like a long-term policy initiative of a government; after all, its founders came from a long tradition of public policy makers.

The Genocide of course wreaked havoc with those plans. **The role of the AGBU changed radically, from the role of a nurturer of change, to the role of the preserver of the nation.** I will not go into the details of how it mobilized to save the hundreds of thousands of refugees, how the surviving women and children were literally kidnapped back from the clutches of their enslavers, how the orphanages were built, how food, shelter, clothing and medical care was provided in the various camps and so on. These are all on record for the curious to discover. The activities of the AGBU today in the Diaspora and in Armenia are also on public record; therefore they need not be repeated. It is though noteworthy to point out that over 400,000 Armenians receive AGBU services every day.

What is even more astonishing is that during the AGBU nation-saving phase, the precursor institution to the UN was the League of Nations; the League had established an explicit institution called the HCR (High Commission for Refugees) under the leadership of Fridjof Nansen, and which was created exclusively to assist the Armenian refugees. **The HCR closely collaborated with and effectively “outsourced” a large part of its operational role to the AGBU. The HCR was so successful in its mission that it received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1938.** Furthermore, when the League of Nations was dismantled after WWII, its only sub-organization that was deemed worthwhile to emulate,

was carried over to the UN, and that formed the core of services of the nascent international organization was none other than the HCR under its new name, the UNHCR. Thus the AGBU finds itself at the historical point where its actions actually give birth to the greatest international organization, the UN itself. The UN in turn rises from the ashes of the HCR, which ironically was founded to assist the surviving victims of the Genocide of the Armenians. It is therefore a multiple irony that today, many of the member countries of the UN, actively deny that Genocide.

4. The fourth and final example of radical lateral thinking is the Zoryan Institute.

Today, the Zoryan Institute is the primary source of academic information, publications and eyewitness recordings of genocide survivors. Its initiatives have spawned several joint projects like the Genocide Studies program at the University of Toronto, research and publication by great scholars, oral history projects, Turkish-Armenian scholarly dialogue of historians, organizing conferences, advocating for human rights around the world and specifically for freedom of speech in Turkey. You can learn more about them from their website [here](#).

The modern struggle for the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians simply cannot be imagined without the presence of the Zoryan Institute. It is arguably the scholarly foundational pillar from which all other modern initiatives have sprung and from which they receive intellectual nourishment. Still with all due respect to be given to the numerous Armenian Studies programs in the various universities in North America, which however, remained more of local initiatives, rather than being engaged in building networks and programs at the scale that Zoryan has achieved.

Yet once again, **this unique institution came about as a radically different thought in the early nineteen eighties.** It came about because G. Libaridian and K. Sarkissian realized that to win the battle for Genocide recognition it was not enough to pursue a political approach through the traditional Armenian political party structures in the Diaspora. They realized that a) the Genocide survivors were rapidly disappearing and would soon be all gone and with them all the thousands of eyewitness accounts that remained to be recorded; b) that such work needed to be led by serious modern professionals equipped with modern tools that would enhance the documentation about the Genocide; c) that it was important to start serious academic dialogue with honest Turkish historians, because the history of the Genocide of Armenians is as much a part of the history of Turkey as it is of Armenia; d) that it was important to tell also the numerous positive stories of good-hearted Turks who saved Armenians by risking their lives; e) that the issue of the Genocide of Armenians must be framed as fundamentally a human rights' issue in order to garner broad international support; and finally, that f) Armenians need to lead an effort in understanding and supporting initiatives to condemn all genocides in order to build alliances with civil society, academics, human rights' activists, independent and free thinking publishers in Turkey etc. to move the issue of recognition forward by a quantum leap; all of this was necessary, specifically because Turkey was mobilizing at the state level

with huge resources allocated to their official campaign of denial.

In hindsight, it turned out that the Zoryan founders were of course right and they might have actually literally saved the cause of Genocide recognition from certain defeat by the state-sponsored propaganda of Turkey. One has to look though at the context of the founding of this unique institution. It was in the period of 1982-84 that the Institute took shape first in the US and then in Canada. What was the state of recognition of the Genocide of Armenians around the world at that time? Politically, there was stagnation; on the ground, the issue of the Genocide was being completely obfuscated by the issue of Armenian terrorism, and by the intra-organizational conflict and murder going on between these various groups. The militant groups that sprung out structurally during the Lebanese civil war had degenerated into mafia-style hit squads. Basically there was no hope on the horizon.

Therefore the founding of the Zoryan Institute was one of the most forward-looking events in the history of the Diaspora. By the very act of its birth it challenged the status quo. That is why it was almost immediately undermined by the traditional organizations in the Diaspora. The political parties were at best neutral. At worst, they worked actively to undermine the Institute because it challenged not only their accomplishments to date but in fact their legitimacy as the torch bearers of the Armenian cause (whatever that meant). That is why party members were threatened with expulsion and effective “excommunication” for supporting the Zoryan Institute. This was conservatism par excellence. Not only the rejection of the new, but also an active mobilization to stifle this innovation and to nip it in the bud.

We should be grateful that they failed miserably.

F. Anti-Conservatism and Secularism as the Way Out of Our Quagmire.

As these four examples clearly illustrate, our anti-conservative initiatives have had profound effects on us as a nation. I am deliberately limiting myself to the last 3 centuries, as it would be difficult (although not impossible) to argue this position for events in the more distant past, where the actual details on the ground would be relatively blurred.

However, at least three of the last four cases mentioned are within the experiential frame of

~~most Armenians alive today.~~ The achievement of Israel Ori can be substantiated within the context of the Armenia that exists and even the successful liberation war in Artsakh can be ultimately linked to his vision of Russian advancement into the Caucasus. The point is though that **such amazing achievements were possible and were in fact arrived at against enormous odds.**

Another characteristic of all four of these efforts was that they were at the core profoundly secular. The Mekhitarists, while Catholics, never limited their schools, their education programs, their publications and so on to Catholics only, quite the contrary. Israel Ori who worked jointly with the Catholicos of the time, soon realized that true power did not lie in the religious institutions, but that only the secular leaders of his time would help him. It is true that he befriended the Pope, but let us not forget that the Pope of the period was also a worldly leader of the Papal States and led his own armies. In other words, there was rarely any religious connotation to any of these four initiatives.

A secular discourse will by definition also bring a secular worldview. This is not meant to suggest that the Armenian Church should have no place within our institutional framework. **The Armenian Church should absolutely play the only role it is best suited and designed to play. That being to focus on the spiritual evolution and emancipation of our people.** Its contribution to the shaping of our identity has been historically significant, however, when it acts beyond its initial scope today it would be contributing to an arrested development. **There is a valid reason that the fundamental tenets of democracy start to blossom under a clear separation of the state from the church (or religion). Otherwise we have theocracies. Theocracies are not paragons of progressive societies.** Apart from the Vatican, almost all the theocracies of the world are Iran, Saudi Arabia and a myriad of states that have the word Islamic attached to their official names. How many Armenians would like to live their lives in such states? Imagine if you are a Christian in Pakistan or a woman in Saudi Arabia? Granted this is an extreme view, but why continue to espouse such a discourse for our country or for the Diaspora?

We are not what we say we are, we are always what we do. One way to look at what defines societies is to look at their overall expenditures. If one, for example, looks at the USA, the overwhelming budgetary allocations of the revenues of the state are spent on the military and defense sector initiatives. Any social spending pales in comparison. That is why the United States is largely a militaristic society, its uneven societal wealth is created through companies engaged in defense related projects, its state priorities are set according to that agenda, and many Americans are directly or indirectly tied to this construct, whether they want to or not. If one looks at Canada, the largest single item spent by all governments combined is related to health care and social services. That is why Canada is the society that it is, and compared to the US it would be considered as largely a welfare state. If one looks at Armenia, close to 10% of its official budgetary expenditures disappear through various corruption channels into the pockets of the oligarchs. That is why Armenia is the country that it is.

If we apply this kind of analysis to the Diasporan communities for instance, one would likely see a

picture where over 80% of community capital and operational expenditures are in some way tied into or through projects of Church initiatives. This would suggest that the Diasporan communities are ultimately caught into a self-view that can only (or largely) manifest itself as revolving around a religious axis. This would also further suggest that the Diaspora cannot imagine itself otherwise. Sure we need churches, but those churches should serve for mass, religious celebrations, weddings, baptisms and burials; but most of all to provide spiritual guidance. Anything beyond that, and they actually hinder our evolution and box us in an intellectual mind trap.

The innovative social scientist Abraham Maslow, who literally invented modern marketing, has said **“when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem will look to you like a nail”**. This is particularly relevant for Diasporan communities because they see the solution of every community issue to be implemented through a church initiative. We need social services? OK, let’s build this church and attach a social service program to it. We need something to attract the youth? Let’s create a youth program under the umbrella of our parish. We need family counseling services? Let’s have the church hire some professionals who could also occasionally volunteer their services. We need a school? Let’s build a Sunday school first attached to the Church. And so on.

Now this approach might have been relevant in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But what it describes is the inability to imagine ourselves except as a church community or a congregation.

That is why a vision of ourselves as something greater is practically inexistent. That is also why for instance that we have not managed to build a single art and culture center in all of North America even when the world's most affluent Armenian communities have lived here for over a century. That is also why we do not have a single Armenian historical museum or gallery that can be of any acceptable caliber to be visited by school children. That is also why we do not have a single Armenian institution in the Diaspora dedicated to producing university level graduate teachers of Armenian language and topics for our numerous schools. That is also why we do not have specialized curriculum experts etc. etc. The list of things we lack and we should have had after such a long existence as a Diaspora is long and it can only be explained at the big picture level. **The big picture level is clear, we are trapped as communities as to how we see ourselves.** Yes there are exceptions, but these exceptions confirm the reality that is evident, rather than contradict it. We only know how to use hammers, yet to build new things we also need screw drivers, saws, power tools, wrenches and so on. **We cannot just hammer away to build a house. It should be quite obvious though that we can demolish a house by just hammering.**

What would be achieved by an aggressive secular view of ourselves and an anti-conservative approach?

- ~~1. *We would release the huge potential that exists in the communities and be able to mobilize the youth who are largely disillusioned and do not see our communities as relevant places allowing them the exercise of their intellectual abilities and imagination at its fullest.*~~
2. **We would be able to attract the diversity of Armenians** who have abandoned the communities (and now constitute a majority), because they see themselves more as full-functioning citizens of their countries. Their Armenian identity is just one part of their reality. In other words, their multiple identities are equally important and evolved, and enhance each other. **They are not in conflict with themselves. The "organized" communities are.**

And that alone is worth a serious try. In fact, anti-conservatism is probably our only guarantee of survival.

I want us to survive, and that is why, as an Armenian, I cannot be a conservative.

Montréal, October 12, 2008

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